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ABSTRACT

The Take Advantage Now/Parent Education Project (TAN/PEP) is based on the knowledge that college students need their parents' help for academic success. The program was developed at Brooklyn College to offer education, support, and counseling for parents and guardians of entering freshmen who have been accepted in a program known as Search, Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK). This paper is an overview and summary of TAN/PEP for the 1986-87 year. The goal of the program is to decrease the high number of students who drop out before graduation and to increase the students' use of program resources. One way of doing this is to get parents more involved in the college life of their offspring. A series of workshops was offered to the parents providing information on the following topics: (1) orientation; (2) study habits, time management, and planning skills; (3) financial aid; (4) the family in the educational process; (5) counseling and advisement; and (6) review of college resources and processes. Parents who attended the workshops felt positive about their participation. They came away with a sense of support and assurance. Because of the parents' previous lack of information, the Project proved to be a major source of information for first-time college students and parents. Parents felt they had gained enough information to act as resources for their children and other family and community members. The project staff will write a new proposal to include a research component to measure the effects of the program on the attitudes of parents and students. A list of 11 references is included. (VM)

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THE TAKE ADVANTAGE NOW/ PARENT EDUCATION PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

Children are society's most important asset and parents are their first teachers and counselors. Even though college students are no longer "children", their parents' support is still necessary for their success. It was with this feeling that the Take Advantage Now/Parent Education Project (TAN/PEP) was conceived.

Developed under the auspices of the Department of Education Services/ SEEK at Brooklyn College, the TAN/PEP Project offers education, support and counseling for parents and guardians of entering freshmen in the SEEK program in the various aspects of college life to which their sons and daughters are exposed. The TAN/PEP Project took place for the first time in the Fall Semester of 1985-86 and was repeated during the Fall Semester of 1986-87. It was funded through the SEEK Program Budget appropriation for Instructional Temporary Service Funds.

This paper is an overview and summary of the Project as it was carried out in 1986-87. It discusses the research and experience which was the impetus for the Project, outlines the purpose and topics of the workshops, and summarizes the responses of the participants. It is offered as a model for other programs interested in exploring ways to provide additional supports for their non traditional students.

ATTRITION AND ITS UNDERLYING CAUSES

The SEEK Program is the higher educational opportunity program at Brooklyn College, as it is in each of the senior colleges of the City University of New York (CUNY). SEEK includes the processes of recruitment, selection, admission, orientation, remediation, guidance, counseling, financial aid, developmental and compensatory instruction throughout the students' college experience. Despite the special components provided by the program, a relatively high portion of SEEK students drop out before graduation and, indeed, do not utilize many of the program resources that are designed to help them complete their college education.

Student retention is a major concern not just in SEEK, but throughout American higher education (Smith, 1982). In colleges in general and at CUNY in particular, researchers have found academic underpreparedness to be a key contributor to attrition (Lavin, Murtha, and Kaufman, 1984; and Perry, 1981). In fact, the Carnegie Council of Policy Studies in Higher Education concluded in 1972 that "because of deficits in our public school system, about one-third of our youth are ill-educated,

[1]The author wishes to thank John Staton who assisted in conducting the workshops and Louise Dennis who assisted with evaluating the project.

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ill-employed, and ill-equipped to make their way in American society" (p. ix). Even though enhancing high school curricula and providing remedial work in college is clearly a primary way to prevent dropping out in college and the resulting problem of unemployment and underemployment, educators are suggesting that we must recognize the complexity of the problem of attrition and develop other strategies for solving it, strategies which address it on many levels (Dollar, 1983, p.410). According to Lavin, Murtha, and Kaufman (1984) the complexity of the problem is increased in an urban institution such as CUNY:

> The urban college student of today enjoys greater opportunities for employment and faces greater family responsibilities than his or her national counterpart. As a large commuter institution located in New York City's diverse service economy, the City University clearly reflects the character of its urban clientele in its long-term attendance and graduation patterns. We believe that as our society becomes more urbanized and careers become more intertwined with higher education, the patterns now evident at City University will predominate. (Lavin, Murtha, and Kaufman, 1984, pp. 17-18)

Respecting the complexity of the problem of attrition, researchers have looked to factors other than academic preparedness to explain why students leave school. They have identified emotional and social preparedness as factors which will help students to maneuver successfully through the rigors of college. One longitudinal study of 9,778 high school seniors revealed that persistence in college is a function of three factors:

1. the importance that the undergraduates themselves assign to a degree;

2. their having decided by the second year of high school or earlier that they would go on to college; and

3. the fact that their parents had definitely wanted them to attend. (Trent and Medsker, 1968, p. 97)

However, for many young people in the lower socio-economic classes, a college education does not have a high level of importance and, indeed, seems to be beyond their grasp both academically and financially. Cope and Hannah (1975) report that many students do not even expect to graduate when they enroll in college. Indeed, 25% of the students who withdraw from college consider doing so before they enroll (Cope and Hannah, 1975, p. 20). Apparently, a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure is an important factor in college dropout rates. Without support of significant adults in their lives to encourage and guide them, students who start out with low expectations are even more likely to leave college.

PARENTS' CONTRIBUTION TO RETENTION

It is the belief of the staff of the TAN/PEP Project that parents are a key factor in helping students become emotionally and socially prepared for college. Whitlock (1983) reminds us that parents remain concerned about the quality of schooling their children receive even when they are in college.

> Many conscientious parents are concerned and trying to do something about the situation in their own families. And for those who are successful, the years of greatest

> pleasure in some ways are those of late adolescence, as communication between child and parent becomes genuinely adult (p. 37).

A 1981 study by Nichols shows that parents not only care about what happens to their college-aged children but have a significant influence on whether or not they succeed. Inspiration, aspiration and expectation flowing from the family had a positive influence on the behavior of the black students at Jackson State surveyed by Nichols. A wide variety of students' aspirations were due to parental status and societal status quo. Approximately forty percent of the students in the study reported that their college enrollment was inspired by familial influence. However, only a small number of students in this study had determined what their plans were ten years hence.

The Jackson State students in Nichols' study were like Brooklyn College SEEK students in several respects. Most of the students surveyed were the first in their family to attend college. Many were from large families with neutral or negative sibling influences. Parents of students such as this often are at a disadvantage in attempting to prepare their children for college or help them through the experience. They may rely upon their children to contribute to the family income or, at least, to become financially independent at an early age, and, therefore, do not encourage them to aspire to go to college. Furthermore, those parents of lower socio-economic students who do wish their children to attend college are often unable to provide the information, advice or encouragement needed for college success because they have not attended college and therefore do not have any experience from which to draw. This is in direct contrast to most middle- and upper-class children who are in academic programs designed to lead them into institutions of higher education and whose parents have college educations and expect them to attend college as a regular part of their education. Therefore, Daher and Weisinger's contention that "transition into college involves a range of issues for parents as well as students," takes on a special meaning in this instance (Daher and Weisinger, 1979, p. 379).

THE TAN/PEP PROJECT

Whitlock has suggested that in situations with special populations such as the SEEK population, greater care must be taken to provide for their needs in college. (Whitlock, 1983). The TAN/PEP Project is one way to meet those special needs. Its purpose is to teach parents and guardians of nontraditional students that there are resources available which, if utilized to the fullest extent, can increase the likelihood of success of their college student.

Parents/guardians who have felt powerless to help their children due to their own lack of educational background, college experiences and/or financial resources may realize that they can make a contribution by demonstrating interest in their sons' and daughters' college endeavors, by sharing information they have learned about resources available through SEEK, and by encouraging their sons and daughters to utilize those resources. Through offering information concerning the available college support services to parents and guardians and reinforcing the importance of their encouragement as role models, the Project Director hoped the parents and guardians would pay more attention in their homes to the practices and procedures required of their children for college retention.

During the first week of the Fall semester 1986, an announcement was made to all entering freshman in the SEEK Program[2] that letters would be sent to their parents asking them to participate in the TAN/PEP Project and a brief description of the project's goals was given. Letters of invitation were prepared and mailed. Nineteen parents and guardians were recruited for the 1986 project.

A series of workshops, which utilized a variety of teaching methods (e.g., lectures, discussion, role-playing), were designed to provide basic information for the parents and guardians on such topics as the structure of the College, how things work and to whom to go for assistance in problem-solving. Specific objectives of the workshops/seminars were:

1. to introduce and define the concept of parent/guardian education;

2. to stress the importance of parent/guardian involvement in the education of children;

3. to inform them of the basic financial aid forms and processes so they might encourage their children to maximize their receipt of subsidy money;

4. to define retention and its impact on the university's services;

5. to make the parents and guardians aware of the role of the SEEK Guidance Counselor, academic advisor and other student service personnel at Brooklyn College;

6. to define counseling and advisement and their role in helping students persist in their educational endeavors; and

7. to explain the leadership role of the University in the retention of students.

The workshops were conducted by the TAN/PEP Project Staff, who are experienced in working with college students and with parent groups. Each workshop covered a specific content. Session one was an orientation. In session two parents were given information that could be used to help improve their child's study habits. The importance of using time management techniques to enhance planning skills that can reduce anxiety was emphasized. The third dealt with the Financial Aid process at Brooklyn College. The fourth, which highlighted the importance of the family in the educational process, included a values clarification exercise for the participants as well as discussion of the Core Curriculum at Brooklyn College. In the fifth session counseling and advisement were defined and information given on the responsibilities of the SEEK Guidance Counselor and other counseling services and activities offered at Brooklyn College. The entire process was reviewed in session six.

To facilitate the process, each participant was given the Brooklyn College Bulletin. This was done to familiarize parents with the rules, regulations and general information needed by all students to succeed and graduate from Brooklyn College. In addition, elements of the "Theme-Centered Interactional Method (TCI)" for leading groups were used to create an environment that was conducive to developing openness and friendliness among the participants and would result in the sharing of pertinent information.

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[2]All SEEK freshmen are enrolled in a DES 0.3, Counseling Workshop, a course which meets two hours per week and provides students with an orientation to Brooklyn College.

ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF TAN/PEP

The question of whether these workshops helped parents to involve themselves in and affect their children's education is an important one. It is clear from the responses that parents who attended felt that their being interested in coming to the sessions would produce a positive effect on their children's feelings toward going to college. A sense of support and assurance was obtained because parents felt that if a problem arose there was now a way to deal with it.

For some of the parents, these sessions were their first opportunity to visit a campus and several commented favorably on the Brooklyn facilities. A few resented the fact that they had not been invited to the College's Freshman Orientation. Because of the parents previous lack of information, the Project proved to be a major source of information for first-time college students and parents. The sense of the researchers was that the parents' participation in the sessions and the knowledge they gained would bring positive results. This sense is reflected in the following comments taken from the evaluation forms.

> "I will encourage my son to use the services of the SEEK Program. I know that he needs financial aid, counseling and, possibly, tutorial services."
>
> "I'm going home and sit down and discuss his day; write it out; try to find more time for study and discuss the syllabus of each class."
>
> "I have already applied things we have discussed and have been successful with my son. Just talking, I have picked up ideas and will continue to use other people's ideas."
>
> "I will meet with my child and discuss a problem that she may have."

It is important to note that the parents felt that they had gained enough information to act as resource people not only for their children but also for other family members and friends in their communities. There was a strong feeling among many that belonging to the college community was now an important goal.

The TAN/PEP project aimed to give the parent/guardian participants a better understanding of Brooklyn College and its resources. The Project Staff hopes that workshop participants (particularly those parents and guardians who want to help but do not know how) will now be more able to intervene positively in the educational process of their children. However, the Project Staff realize that measuring the effectiveness of this project in terms of the impact that it may have upon the behavior of the students themselves is an extremely difficult task. Now that there have been two groups of parents and guardians who have taken part in this program, it would be appropriate to look at student success at the end of one year and two years at Brooklyn College.

The Project Staff is in the process of developing a proposal for a future TAN/PEP Project that includes a research component aimed at measuring the effects of the project upon the attitudes of the participating parents and guardians and upon the college students' persistence and use of resources. It is the staff's belief that the positive attitudes of the participants toward the program, as evidenced by their responses to the questionnaires, will have a positive effect on student retention.

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